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ABSTRACT

Family systems theory's contribution to the world of psychotherapy was its move away from lineal causality toward a view of human relationships as not merely multi-determined, but unavoidably and inextricably inter-related and inter-dependent. Circular causation allows the therapist to assume enormous flexibility. The rise of family therapy in post World War II America is consistent with the "Protean man" described by Lifton and the alienated individual described by Mead. Family theorists incorporated into their theorizing, as do all theorists, the experiences of their own lives, which in this case included the discontinuity of World War II. This is the essence of circular causation, and a concept used by a variety of contemporary therapists influenced by family systems thinking. To move to the structural level, the "aesthetics" versus "pragmatics" debate eventually faded. It was an expression of "sociological ambivalence." Its effect was to crystallize but to mislabel the fundamental conflicts of family therapy; opportunism versus idealism, and conservatism versus radical social criticism. By mislabeling the issue, it helped to obscure it, and finally guaranteed that the "mystery-mastery" complex remain intact, that the forces influencing family dynamics remain obscure and impenetrable, while allowing and encouraging the development of sophisticated methods of behavioral control and mystification. (ABL)

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# The Role of The Individual and Individual Responsibility in Family Therapy[1]

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## Introduction

Therapy always grows, as does every idea, out of the culture in which it is developed. It unavoidably reflects, enforces and reinforces that culture's dominant values in both treatment and diagnosis (Kleinman, 1985; Obeyesekere, 1985; Lichtman, 1982). That was true for Freud (Schneider, 1975), and it is true for family therapy (Aponte, 1985; Meyerstein and Dell, 1985). What then is the culture out of which family therapy grew? Most importantly it has been the culture of post World War II America.

Robert Jay Lifton has written about the "protean man," as the post WWII model of humanity. As one author has put it, summarizing Lifton's views, this individual "... has been undergoing what appears to be a continuous identity crisis where the inner and outer worlds remain unconnected and every kind of faith and loyalty exist as tentative propositions of the passing present." (Karier, 1986, p.81). The

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same author, in describing the views of George Herbert Mead, noted the influence of Mead on Lifton; "For Mead, the past was dead and had meaning only as meaning was ascribed to it from the present context. In this sense, he felt that **we actually constructed our history from the present to the past while creating the illusion that it was created from the past to the present.**" (Karier, 1986, p. 82, emphasis added). Mead anticipated the world view that allowed and was then reinforced by the war. I will argue that family therapy, and most especially some of its central concepts, such as circularity, neutrality, symmetry, and complementarity, are reflective of these "protean" qualities. Further, I will argue that family therapy, like much of psychology, displays the effects of what David Bakan called the "mystery-mastery complex."

Bakan described this phenomenon in the following way, "The complex of which I speak consists in the simultaneous pursuit of two objectives: to keep the nature of human personality from being understood, to preserve it under a cloak of mystery; and to master, or predict and control the behavior of human beings." (Bakan, 1967, p. 37). The "mystery-mastery complex" is a way to describe a hidden process within the discipline. How does that process express itself, if at all, in the consciousness or unconscious of practitioners? I believe that the simultaneous expression of such opposing goals has an effect that

is akin to what Merton called "sociological ambivalence" (Merton, 1976). He defined sociological ambivalence in the following way;

> In its most extended sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior assigned to a status (i.e. social position) or to a set of statuses in a society. In its most restricted sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a single role of a single social status (for example, the therapist role of the physician as distinct form other roles of his or her status as researcher, administrator, professional colleague, participant in the professional association, etc.).
>
> ...since these norms cannot be simultaneously expressed in behavior, they come to be expressed in an oscillation of behaviors: of detachment and compassion, of discipline and permissiveness, of personal and impersonal treatment.
>
> (Merton, 1976, p. 6,8)

Therapists thus find themselves in the untenable - even unmentionable- position of being compelled by theory to view family difficulties in systemic terms while being equally compelled by their growing acceptance in society, to neglect systemic forces such as

racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, etc. The result is that neither society nor the individual is held adequately accountable for harmful actions or patterns of behaving.

One recent controversy in the field of family therapy, the debate between the "aestheticists" and the "pragmatists" bears examining because it illustrates the essential conflict within family therapy between the idealistic tendency to attempt systemic change on the broad level, and on the other hand, the opportunistic tendency to seek any effective avenue for change regardless of systemic consequences or social implications. In describing this debate, some of the central concepts of family therapy will be described, and their relationship to the ahistorical, alienated, "Protean man" will become clear.

**Background**

A basic tenet of family therapy is circularity, i.e. the idea that we can't accurately think of causation as a lineal process, with "A" invariably leading to "B." Rather, we can more usefully think of "A" and "B" as mutually causing each other in a circular or recursive process. Circularity is what makes family therapy unique to its time, and is what gives it the basis for its analytical power. To think lineally, is to fall into the pernicious traps of blame, projection, and scapegoating, while to view behavior as non-lineally, or circularly

determined, allows us to understand and effect changes in family systems, in novel, flexible, and more effective ways (Hoffman, 1981).

The very usefulness and power of family systems concepts led to an interesting schism in the family therapy literature; the controversy that raged a couple of years ago, and is still relevant, between the "aestheticists" and the "pragmatists." This debate concerned the analytic approach and the scope of intervention that should guide family therapy. The "aestheticists" hold that therapy should adhere closely to systems theory at its purest. Formulations from this point of view aim especially for theoretical elegance and inclusiveness, they seek to understand 'the pattern that connects' and to work with that pattern quickly and comprehensively. Interventions should thus elegantly and simply reorient the family, using as a guide a sophisticated understanding of family systems behavior and modes of influence (Cecchin, 1987).

The "pragmatists" on the other hand, use the same sophisticated techniques to solve symptomatic problems, but they place little value on theory, valuing what works over what makes theoretical sense (Bergman, 1985). They introduce small changes that are focused on solving specific problems. Both approaches have been criticized, each for its own weaknesses.

**Critiques of aesthetics vs. pragmatics**

Those who adhere to a "pragmatic" approach, notably Jay Haley (Haley, 1977) and his school of Strategic family therapy, have been criticized for drifting away from systems theory (Keeney, 1983). The primary criticism is that without theory, they are reliant on a few handy techniques, opportunistically applied. They have further been criticized for their tendency to see family dynamics in terms of issues of power, almost to the exclusion of all else, as though family difficulties were always based on idiosyncratic and shifting power imbalances, i.e. they have no analysis of the origins nor of consistencies in power imbalances across families. Instead they tend to see the same types of imbalances across families without paying much attention to their causes or correlates.

The "aesthetic" approach has been criticized for its rigid adherence to mechanistic concepts derived from the worlds of machines, computers, and biology. Rather than addressing the passions and fears that govern so much of family life, they spin their wheels endlessly in analysis of "feedback loops" and "equifinality," while doing essentially the same things as the pragmatists, and contributing little to the field beyond impenetrable journal articles (Papp,1986).

Both the aesthetic and the pragmatic approaches have been most trenchantly taken to task by the feminist critique of family therapy (Hare-Mustin, 1987). Feminist critics of family therapy see failures in both the theory and the techniques of family therapy as it is currently

practiced and taught. From the feminist point of view central concepts of family therapy theory, e.g. the concepts of circularity, neutrality, and complementarity, are all flawed in their culture-boundedness and their tendency to support male domination in the family and society. As one group of feminist family therapists have pointed out regarding the central concepts of circularity, neutrality, and complementarity:

> **Complementarity**
>
> Complementarity assumes that an observed inequality in an interaction is only temporary and play-acting. At a deeper level of reality, so it goes, the partners are actually equal; they began as equals, will be equal again, and, in fact, will likely switch places in the next unequal exchange... This is the sort of reframing useful for making the less powerful party feel fine about being so. Under complementarity, the reality of structured oppression is defined out of existence.
>
> **Circularity**
>
> The idea that people are involved in recursive patterns of behavior, reactively instigated and mutually reinforced, results either in making everyone equally responsible for every;thing or no one accountable for anything.... (re' wife beating...) The outrage of the act and the

> violence of the actor are lost in theoretical discussions about punctuating an infinite regression of events. That gambit also dismisses the suffering.

**Neutrality**

> Neutrality, or multilateral partiality, is a stance recommended by systems theorists for the therapist to hold so that each member of the family feels sided with and no one feels sided against. This stance obviously parallels the other systemic constructs discussed here that are aimed at holding either everyone or on one responsible. Every time the issues in therapy are distinctly sexist, the therapist perpetuates the inequality by being evenhanded.
>
> (Goodrich, et.al., 1988, p.16-18).

Feminist therapists have not been alone in criticizing central concepts of family systems theory and therapy. Lyman Wynne has noted that the notion of circularity demands that neither the theory nor the practice of family therapy should function in a "lineal" way, i.e. implying a fixed causative chain. While ostensibly avoiding lineality has led to some improvements in practice, he points out that in fact, most effective interventions are highly lineal, that in fact the kind of

recursiveness implied in notions of circularity fails to take into account that therapists have goals toward which they direct their interventions and presumably their clients. Furthermore,

> The only therapists whose interventions are nonlineal are those whose goals drift, or who remain perpetually exploratory or enduringly interested only in relating or in research. At the pragmatic level of therapeutic effectiveness, nonlineality equals ineffectiveness.
>
> ...as Haley has increasingly stressed the issue of effectiveness of treatment, he has largely set aside a circular model of therapy. Only a theory utterly detached from practice could transmute his directives, tasks, and construction of hierarchies so that they could be thought of as relevant to a circular epistemology.
>
> ... any push to establish hierarchies in a therapeutic system explicitly follows a lineal model. Incongruously, almost all family therapists of other schools also work toward establishing altered hierarchies (though often not labeled as such), but almost all still believe that they use a "circular" systems model in therapy, while almost none recognize that these interventions are largely lineal.

(Wynne, 1986, p.256-259)

Lineality must therefore, not be seen as a throwback to pre-Family Therapy times, but instead is an assumption underlying effective intervention in family therapy - whether leaning toward an "aesthetic preference" or toward a "pragmatic" approach. This realization has consequences for family therapy's view of the individual and individual responsibility; for while circularity may deal implicitly with notions of individual responsibility, lineality requires that the underlying value stance must be overt and explicit.

**Conclusion**

If we step back from the specifics of the debate, and look at it instead from the point of view of process, and its place in the development of the field of family therapy, the fact of the debate, rather than its content alone tells us something about family therapy and its relation to the society in which it flourishes.

To begin with content, family systems theory's contribution to the world of psychotherapy, was its move away from lineal causality toward a view of human relationships as not merely multi-determined, but unavoidably and inextricably inter-related and inter-dependent. Circular causation allows the therapist to assume enormous flexibility. The rise of family therapy in post WWII

America, is consistent with the "Protean man" described by Lifton, and the alienated individual described by Mead. Family theorists, working in a climate marked by the traumatic break with history that was a result of WWII, incorporated into their theorizing, as do all theorists, the experiences of their own lives - in this case the enormous discontinuity they experienced in their own lives in the era immediately before, during, and after WWII. To return to a passage quoted earlier, Mead's view of history was that, "...we actually constructed our history from the present to the past while creating the illusion that it was created from the past to the present." (Karier, 1986). This is the essence of circular causation, and a concept used by a variety of contemporary therapists influenced by family systems thinking.

If the past is a mere construction, responsibility, especially individual responsibility, is also a mere construction, and as such, something to be treated with a good deal of delicacy if not outright avoidance. It allows the appearance of value neutrality, while enforcing cultural values.

To move to the structural level, the "aesthetics" versus "pragmatics" debate eventually faded. It was in a sense, a debate between the hand and the heart of family therapy, and an expression of "sociological ambivalence." Its effect was to crystallize but to mislabel the fundamental conflicts of family therapy; opportunism

versus idealism, and conservatism versus radical social criticism. By misiabeling the issue it helped obecure it, and finally guaranteed that the "mystery-mastery" complex remain intact, that the forces influencing family dynamics remain obscure and impenetrable, while allowing and even encouraging the development of sophisticated methods of behavioral control and mystification.

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